

The Jewish Publication Society's Torah, since 1985, has translated a phrase from Genesis 9:6 as "I will require a reckoning." The word "reckon" is not found in other major English translations, such as the NRSV and KJV, which are simply translated to "will I require." The use of "a reckoning" turns out to play a central role in maintaining the value of life under the post-flood God-human relationship and conflicts within human society. "A reckoning" signifies the new establishment of God-given law and divine accountability over human life and the settlement of responsibility for bloodshed. To support my perspective, I would like to examine the meaning behind the English word "reckon" first, and then consider scholarly works.

The New Oxford American Dictionary mentions that the term "reckon" means "to settle accounts with" or "calculation" in an archaic sense.<sup>1</sup> Considering the context, to "require a reckoning" emphasizes that God demands a settlement that is exactly equal to the lost human life. Hebrew terminology agrees with it. The Hebrew verb *וְיָצַר* means resort to, seek, or exact, with a collateral idea of avenging.<sup>2</sup> Despite humans being originally "created in the image of God" (Gen 1:27), God had not ruled on a matter of humans taking the life of other creatures, including humans themselves. In Genesis 9:5-6, God took a step forward in distinguishing humans from other creatures in terms of the value of life.<sup>3</sup> The other pivotal Hebrew word is *דְּנָה*, which translates as "By human" in Genesis 9:6.

Jančovič examined two mainstream strategies to read the verse Genesis 9:6. By analyzing Genesis 9:6 grammatically, it has a poetic feature that uses *דְּנָה* (man, mankind) three times and the verb *יָצַר* (pour out, to shed) two times.<sup>4</sup> This structure qualifies the verse as a tricolon,

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<sup>1</sup> "reckon." In *New Oxford American Dictionary*, edited by Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> "וְיָצַר" In *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Samuel Rolles Driver, Francis Brown, and Charles Augustus Briggs, 1906, <https://www.sefaria.org/BDB>.

<sup>3</sup> All verses are cited from JPS Torah (2006) otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> "דְּנָה" and "יָצַר" In *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*.

highlighting the symmetry between crime and punishment.<sup>5</sup> In theological perspective, the latter half of the verse provides a causal relation that demands God to “require a reckoning.”<sup>6</sup> Both strategies effectively convey the importance of the verse, yet the interpretation of the verse is not straightforward. The two major interpretations emerged from the ambiguous nature of the Hebrew term, *וְבַתָּה* (*וְבָת* + *תָה*; man, mankind + an interrogative prefix).<sup>7</sup> JPS reflects the theory to interpret *תָה* as means or instrument, so it is “By human.” This interpretation supports God’s reckoning of the murderer using humanity as his instrument. The other approach interprets *תָה* as expressing price or exchange, which could be translated as “for the human.” When applying this interpretation, Genesis 9:5-6 offers a different action of God, where God precisely promises, “I will avenge your blood; for you I will require a reckoning.”<sup>8</sup> No mediating instrument exists.

JPS commentary provides another unique insight into Genesis 9:5-6. “Require a reckoning” “for in the image of God was humankind made” (Gen 9:5, 6) is appropriate because of the newly allowed animal slaughtering and the flood that eradicated almost all of human life, which could be dehumanizing and life-cheapening with ease.<sup>9</sup> As a narrative flow, it fits perfectly. In addition to what the commentary mentioned, the treatment of blood is an important knowledge for humankind, who had not been permitted to eat animals before. The commentary continues that the verses are “the reaffirmation of the sanctity of human life.” I cannot fully agree with this statement. The sacredness of human life is surely affirmed. However, I find the life-blood in general, including that of animals, is also confirmed as sacred. Humankind ruling

<sup>5</sup> Jozef Jančovič, "Blood Revenge in Light of the Imago Dei in Genesis 9:6," *The Biblical Annals* 10, no. 2 (Feb 21, 2020), 195. doi:10.31743/bibam.5351, <https://czasopisma.ku.pl/ba/article/download/5351/7765>.

<sup>6</sup> Jančovič, 194, 197.

<sup>7</sup> “*תָה*, *תָה*” In *Jastrow*, Marcus Jastrow, 1903, <https://www.sefaria.org/Jastrow>.

<sup>8</sup> Jančovič, 194-197; Nathan Mastnjak, "The Death Penalty and the Consequences of the Literal Meaning of Genesis 9:6," Accessed Nov 21, 2025, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-death-penalty-and-the-consequences-of-the-literal-meaning-of-genesis-9-6/>.

<sup>9</sup> Nahum M Sarna, *Genesis = be-Reshit: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 61, 1989.

and able to slaughter animals does not remove the sacredness of the lives of animals nor degrade them. It is a new responsibility from God to post-flood humans, so that animals obey the divine order. Regardless of whether it is animals or humans, if creatures are against the divinely established order, they must take responsibility (Gen 9:5). Thus, it was not only a statement affirming human sanctity but also a statement affirming the sanctity of all creatures. Blood is sacred, but there is no distinction between human and animal blood. The commentary adds that verses 5 to 6 also exhibit “the inviolability of the human person.” I agree with this statement, as the phrase “require a reckoning” implies. What makes humans inviolable is not the life-blood but the reflected image of God. Moreover, God himself assures the value of human life by saying, “I (*God*) will require a reckoning” (Gen 9:5; Italicized part added by the author) for human life-blood. As I mentioned earlier, the Hebrew verb *וְנַקֵּחַ* implies avenging in the context of avenging blood. It makes murder an absolute crime regardless of who and why committed. It is notable that on God’s list of requirements for a reckoning, “every beast” came before “humankind” (Gen 9:5). It suggests that the murder by animals was common, and there is no distinction between animals and humankind who killed humans. JPS commentary notes that the murderer loses his image of God. Thus, he is eligible to be punished by death, like animals.<sup>10</sup> What makes humans inviolable is solely the image of God in each human. It echoes the dehumanization of those who do not maintain the image of God in literal understanding.

Scholarly works explore the concept of God's image through two theories to interpret and avoid dehumanization.<sup>11</sup> One approach is to define the image of God as an inherent status, not a moral quality that can disqualify. This group of scholars argues that the inherent image of God provides inviolability to the victim, while the murderer also preserves inviolability but is subject

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<sup>10</sup> Sarna, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Jančovič, 204.

to God’s “reckoning” as their act of violation over human life is usurping God.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, a punisher could avenge blood by capital punishment because they have authority.<sup>13</sup> The authority of the punisher derives from humans being a representative on earth through a delegation from God to humans.<sup>14</sup> The “direct statement of God’s sovereignty over life” justifies selected humans to be God’s instrument to achieve his vengeance.<sup>15</sup> It is also found in Genesis 9:6, “Whoever sheds human blood, *By human [hands]* shall that one’s blood be shed.”<sup>16</sup> In this theory, dehumanization against the murderer does not happen, as it follows God saying, “I will require a reckoning,” and humans should have no authority over any sort of other humans unless divinely chosen. Most importantly, this theory applies solely to murderers.

The other theory features a nonviolent interpretation. In this approach, “image of God” is unconditional and permanent for all humankind. Jančovič discussed the modern interpretation of Genesis 9:6 that highlights human beings as the image of God so that human life should not be taken under any condition.<sup>17</sup> This theory interprets “require a reckoning” differently, as it does not focus on how God will require it. Instead, the approach reads God affirmed the value of human life by prohibiting murder and providing divine punishment if the divinely valuable object were harmed. By reserving the “reckoning” to God, it resolves the existential ethical threat posed by conditional divinity within humanity. The murderer will be avenged, but not by humans but by God. This theory is more covenantal than previous ones, as God plays a significant role in executing judgment of inherent human matters.<sup>18</sup> Despite scholars actively discussing who requires and who reckons the life-blood, both agree that the image of God within humanity

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<sup>12</sup> Mastnjak.

<sup>13</sup> Jančovič, 198-199.

<sup>14</sup> Jančovič, 200-201.

<sup>15</sup> Sarna, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Italicized by the author to emphasize.

<sup>17</sup> Jančovič, 192, 202-203.

<sup>18</sup> Jančovič, 198-199.

cannot be lost or taken away by humans. JPS translation sheds light on the inviolability of human life and actively affirms universal human dignity.

The translation of Genesis 9:5 as “I will require a reckoning” captures the argument throughout the paper that Genesis 9:1-7 established absolute divine responsibility for the unauthorized shedding of human blood. This translation accurately reflects the nature of the Hebrew verb *שׁוֹרֵךְ*, which implies divine demand for avenging human life-blood. “A reckoning” emphasizes the theological framework for the blood retribution in 9:6. It is rooted in the inviolability of the human being made in the image of God. Scholars emphasize that the violation of the image of God inherent in humans is the supreme crime, as it usurps God and claims control over human life and death. The question of who carries out God’s reckoning remained unanswered, as it depends on the interpretation of the Hebrew language. Regardless of the approaches, both sides agree that God’s reckoning must be done in the sake of God, not solely for human will. God’s promise for reckoning strongly requests justice, especially when read as a part of the post-flood narrative. God has eradicated violence, but he knew there would be violence among humans, so he made a divine promise to be distantly remembered and protect his followers.

*I have adhered to the Honor Code for this assignment - Satoru Uchida*

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